

Last Thursday, December 15, 2011, marked the official end of America's nine-year war in Iraq. In a low-key ceremony in Baghdad, U.S. troops lowered the American flag of command that flew over the Iraqi capital. The 4,000 remaining U.S. service members in Iraq will leave by year's end.

The Iraq war was a difficult, painful time, extraordinarily costly in terms of American lives and resources. More than 4,400 Americans, including 45 Nebraskans, were killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Two hundred twenty-seven Nebraskans were wounded in combat. Tens of thousands of Iraqis lost their lives.

We lost good men and women, individuals full of life and blessed with talent, whose proud families awaited their return to the country they loved and served.

In spite of our wounds, we are proud. We are proud of our fallen heroes, proud of the veterans who have come back to us, proud of their sacrifice, and proud of their noble vision that has significantly changed the global environment -- where democratic ideals are making steady gains. The work of our troops, steadily done in the midst of extensive public debate about the war and the strategy, was the strength of this mission. They achieved what was set before them. The victories are theirs. Their unwavering commitment, their skill, and their bravery got the job done.

The troops' efforts unbound an Iraqi people held hostage for decades by an egomaniacal tyrant. Insurgencies, led by terrorists seeking to wreak havoc and disorder, were put down. Space was created to allow Iraqis the time necessary to build the foundations of a representative government and an open society.

"After a lot of blood spilled by Iraqis and Americans, the mission of an Iraq that could govern and secure itself has become real," U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta declared at the Baghdad ceremony.

There are still challenges and significant obstacles. It would have been preferable for a small stay-behind force to remain for ongoing response and stabilization efforts. The way forward will

not be easy. But today Iraqis determine Iraq's future. No longer constricted by the dictates of a despot, they have held elections, they have written a constitution, and hopefully they will build a culture that respects the rights and dignity of all people.

America, and the world, needs a stabilized Iraq. Our security is strengthened by it, and we will continue a strong diplomatic relationship to help achieve it. An Iraq that protects the rights of its people - Sunni and Shiite, Christian and Yezidi - and employs a government that maintains order and preserves liberties will be an Iraq that can help transform a Middle East looking for a new way. The foundation for this has been laid, after much toil and bloodshed, by valiant American soldiers, who return to us now modern-day heroes.

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